"NGO Networks: how do we support learning and capacity building amongst our membership?"

Report of a dialogue between membership organisations
Amsterdam, October 10 – 11, 2005

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Introduction

On the 10th and 11th of October, 2005, a group of thirteen different umbrella bodies of international development NGO's from all over the world has come together to share experiences relating to how we support learning and capacity building within our NGO members.
The event has been organised by BOND, the UK's broadest network of international development NGOs, and PSO, a Dutch NGO umbrella organisation that focuses on capacity building.

This event resulted directly from a get together between PSO, BOND and the Swedish network organisation. "We met by chance, but it was very useful," Gabrielle (BOND) said. "We found out that we were working in a similar area but in different ways, and we wanted to keep the conversation going. And then we thought: why keep it to those three groups that were so randomly thrown together?"

This two-day event was organised around the theme: How do we support learning and capacity building amongst our membership?

The open-space method will be used, to discuss the theme: 'How do we support learning and capacity building amongst our membership?'. "We made no assumptions," Vicky, facilitator for BOND, said. "We chose for a program that will allow the questions, differences and experiences to emerge."

Hopes and Fears

Every participant is asked to write down his or her hopes for this event and his or her fears. It appeared that several similar hopes and fears were shared by many, although one of the main fears was that the group was too diverse to hold a clear discussion. Another main fear was that there would not be enough time to discuss the subject thoroughly and that the group would therefore only scratch the surface of the discussion points. Others expressed their fears of discussing the issues on an abstract level.

Language could be a problem: not only literally, because English was not everyone's mother tongue, but also because of the diversity of the different organisations.

One participant pointed out that these kinds of events have been held before, and that there was a risk that the exercise would become somewhat rhetorical. Another participant completed: "If there is no follow up or follow through, this could be a missed opportunity."

Many participants were looking for a sense of direction. They hoped to exchange experiences, to learn from one another and to get new ideas. "I would like to leave a bit less confused about what we are doing."

Show and Tell

Every participant was asked to bring an item that would symbolize his or her daily work. Notwithstanding the diversity of the group, many participants chose the same objects. Chocolate was one of the themes: "Life is like a box of chocolates," quoted Anne-Marie the famous Forest Gump. She brought a box of Cadbury's. "People have their favourites, but sometimes they have to unwrap a different one." Jean produced a box of Belgian chocolates: "This is about quality," he said. "And chocolates are important to facilitate things…" Lee showed a 'Haags hopje', a typically Dutch type of candy. "Skills are like little chocolates," he said. "But you only understand it when you unwrap it." "And then you find out it's not chocolate at all," Maaike laughed.
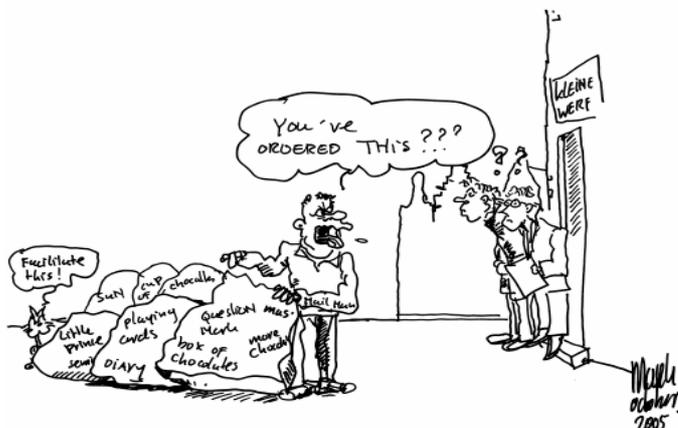
Hans brought his electronic diary: "This is my brain," he said. "I work with 35 people. The only way to make sure that learning happens across these 35, I need my diary to organize everything." Maaike brought a low tech version of the same idea: a pink booklet to write everything down, just like Jennifer brought a 'The Little Prince' note pad of, one of her favourite books. Gabrielle brought mascara: "To make the eyes more open."

Other items were: a mirror, to take a look behind one to learn from predecessors, a camera to take a look at what's been done – the French theme – and the Dutch brought cards, symbolizing the fun of learning or the simple reality about it: "To learn the rules, just play along." Russell brought a bar of butter: "Learning can be perceived as heavy, but if you spread it, it will stick."

First talk in smaller groups & the following plenary discussion

The participants formed small groups, who were asked to map out the differences and the things that their organisations had in common. "It was good to make everyone talk," one of the participants remarked.

The big themes:
- How does one get the right people together?
- How do you find out what people want to learn?
- How can you support people to spread the word?

Many of the questions had to do with a problem that every organisation faced, the problem of ownership: to make sure that people feel responsible for their learning.

Some of the noteworthy differences are that the Dutch found that they were not occupied with human resources issues where the Irish, Belgians and French were. Furthermore, it struck people that the Mexican organisation, when they started working with their members, they had to rely on communication by means of telephone, as they cannot use e-mail to reach their member organisations. With time and a lot of work for 3 1/2 years, now they use e-mail and a learning portal to exchange knowledge.

Kaustov from Pria suggested thinking about working with new organisations instead of just working with the existing members. Lee pointed out that development workers tend to think they know everything: "If you work in the 'good' sector, one tends to think that everything is rose-scented", he said. "We have to get people out of their comfort zone." BOND finds it hard to find someone that is willing to voice a dissonant tone, he said.

Anne of the Canadian Counsel sees a culture clash between university graduates and different NGO's: "Graduates have the tendency to talk *at* people instead of with people", she said.

Twelve themes

After lunch, the group started to select the main questions and issues about capacity building. Finally, twelve different themes arose. These themes were discussed the next day of the event. Ideas were written on so-called 'eureka'-sheets. Not every topic has been discussed.

A brief outcome:

1. Capacity Building

Apparently, the themes around capacity building in itself were quite existential: e.g. 'what ís capacity building?', or 'what do we do (now and in our own work) with different interpretations of learning and capacity building?' The question 'how do you identify the need for capacity building? Do we know what it 'feels' like to have one's capacity built?' was dealt with in issue nr. 2: needs assessment. The other questions have not been further discussed.

2. Needs assessment

Many questions arose around the theme of how to assess the needs of the member organisations. When to act, and when to answer, and who should be in the driver's seat. Two solutions were proposed on the eureka-sheet: talk to the members and construct surveys.

The example of the Mexican supporting member organisations in a self-assessment of their organisation was inspiring. Another idea that came up was to develop learning trajectories together with member organisations, which helps to understand the learning questions of the members. One conclusion that came from this discussion was finding out that the needs of members are essential to our work. It takes time, but taking this time is vital and rewarding.

3. Valuing learning

The questions surrounding this topic were of great diversity. A few examples:

- How can we facilitate long term deep learning, given the very limited resources (staff and money)?

- What other 'roles' of our organisations add value to our learning and capacity building roles, like advocacy, funding?

- How to create a 'learning culture' within organisations? How do we encourage / facilitate an interest / willingness throughout member organisations to resource and participate in capacity strengthening?

If there was any discussion about this on the second day, not trace of this was left behind.
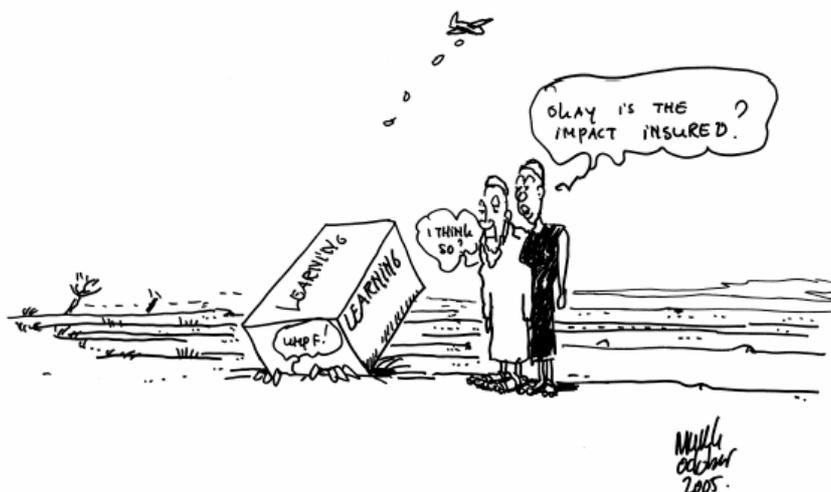
4. Ownership

There are more questions than answers about ownership: what are the power issues in member organisations and network organisations in context of learning? How can we actively and successfully participate in capacity building? How to involve others within your own organisation? What gives ownership to the members of learning networks? How is the balance between being active and overburdening your members with learning activities found?

First of all, a definition had to be found: 'Ownership, of what?' A good communication flow is necessary, this in respect to orientation and skills. One has to be aware of the menace of centralising information, due to the fact that this can lead to a power shift within an organisation. Furthermore, the exact definition had to be defined as to what a member is: is it just a name, does it depend on how much money a member pays to platforms?

5. Trust

The topic 'trust' did not so much raise questions, but the following remark: 'Effective learning in networks requires trust above anything else. Building this should be core for all of us.'

6. Partnership

The issues around partnership focused around three topics:

- 'Partnership' approach to capacity building: donor ↔ recipient relationship?

- How to increase mutual south/north learning?

- How can we involve our partners in the south into the learning processes we set up here more? How do we learn together?

During the discussion, two things were found to be of great importance. Considering the member organisations, it was pointed out that there are different kinds of partnerships: members, community groups, Southern / Northern partners of members and other networks.

In relation to the own network organisation, it is vital to realise that there are limits in what they can achieve. One has to ask: what is possible in what role? The organisations should be aware of the reality of their own capacity versus being 'experts' to 'build' others. Furthermore, there should be no gap between what we promote versus what we do.

7. Methodology

A few examples of methodology-focused questions:

- What are the different ways of bringing people together to learn?

- Small staff… Many members… How do we tailor service?

- How can we use ICT for e-learning and e-collaboration? What works, what does not?

- How to co-produce with different members in an efficient way?

- How do we link learning to change?

Initially, the question was: is there anything other than training? During the discussion, the question was rephrased into: how can we make training more effective?

There are many ways to make training more effective. Such as, introducing time slots between workshops, this allows participants to practice their new skills. If several objectives for a working group are identified, this can help trigger people to come and work together. The French example of supporting member organisations is setting up evaluations that can also be useful to help members learn. Another example from F3E: after a training there is a consultant or an expert stand-by for questions for a period of up to three 3 months.

8. Individual   → Organisational learning

Many networks seemed to have trouble getting past the contact people of the member organisation, in order to connect with the right people within that organisation. Another issue was how to transform individual learning into organisational learning and change. *Are* we working with organisations or individuals?

A few suggestions to that could be used to reach the entire organisation:

1: **target seniors or the management** of the member organisation. By asking them for their approval if their employees participate in a learning process, they can also be drawn in and thus obligated to work with the out coming results. Organise director's lunches. For director participation in an action learning set: not with those they compete with… Be aware of the fact that learning often creates a dynamic of change which directors don't control. Committing to training is 'easy', committing to learning day-to-day is scary for directors!

2: there should be a **minimal number** of people participating from one organisation per learning process. Give participators **methodology** to try in their organisation. Learning processes over time allows them to experiment in practice.

3. Invest in the capacity of your staff's facilitation skills.

9. Governance

The issue 'governance' was initially just there because one of the participants added the following remark to the pile of questions: 'Learning is not just about methodologies, but also about how organisations account to themselves and to the public.' The second day of the event, it appeared that governance was one of the themes that led to most discussion.

The importance of a healthy checks & balances system was pointed out, as well as transparency: internal and external accountability. Informal contacts between board members and senior management should be fostered. It is regarded as a responsibility of the network organisation to create awareness amongst members about the risks of 'bad' governance.

10. Own learning (professional development)

Action learning is one of the main concerns within the issue 'our own learning': What skills and attitudes are required to promote 'action learning'? Are we all convinced that action learning is the way forward? And what do our members think about learning and action learning?

These questions have not been answered. The suggestions written on the eureka-sheet deal with the methodology around learning in general: find the language, find the right time, and find the link between information and knowledge. Take responsibility for the learning process. And: 'for internal learning: try to bypass the formal hierarchy.'

11. Measuring impact

A few examples of the questions concerning measuring impact:

- How do we respond to the demand for impact assessment?

- What do we need to do to make a follow up of learning processes successful (e-mails, websites, list servers, forums, discussion)?

- How do we follow the impact of learning activities within member organisations?

On the eureka-sheet, three aims of measuring impact were defined. We measure impact for funders, for members and for ourselves.

12. Existential: why do we do what we do?

We do what we do, because we believe in change towards power shift. We want to share skills and ideas. We feel solidarity with others and need to hear it when things go wrong. Our goal is to build the capacity of the civil society.

Discussion

After the first two rounds, a plenary discussion was held. During this conversation, several things that had struck the participants were discussed. Lee said he never before thought about the possibility to send facilitators from their own network organisation to their members to do a 'needs assessment'. Russell pointed out the possible consequences of the growing influx of ex-private sector managers in development work. Bram said he never realised that his organisation presumed it is only working with the member organisations and their Southern partner organisations, but that the member organisations often have their own field organisation as well. "We just ignore that," he said.

After the discussion and lunch the group had the third, more in-depth workshop. The event ended with an evaluation in which every participant answered these following three questions:

1. What are you taking with you?
2. How could others help you?
3. What do you want to happen with this group?

Russell: "I am glad to find that we are not alone in our craziness. Leadership appeared to be a theme. I realised that there are many different approaches to 'learning' in our networks. The ICT-based approach of SANGONET is something we from PSO could link up with. PSO could help Dóchas with their HIV/AIDS work. It would be a good idea to link up through our websites and share our publications and meet again in 1,5 year."

Gabrielle: "I found it interesting to see that organisations face similar needs. My assumptions have been challenged: BOND is not set in stone. I would like to keep connections open and meet again. There might be particular issues that we would like to go deeper into, like donors and learning or sector issues."

Anne: "I've heard lots of interesting ideas and new questions. I would love to share written texts: we should think about putting down what we know and do, to build a resource base that reflects the uniqueness we have. It's about a strong civil society sector, national and international. We should support each other."

Anne-Marie: "I had some issues with liaison people. Now I found it is probably better to go deep with some people instead of wide with everyone. I will work more closely with some organisations and encourage the members to get to know each other better. The challenge we still face: the members are too busy to learn. And: how to link funding and learning?"

Géraldine: "We share a lot of questions, but have different approaches. It would be good to exchange each other's newsletters. I'm looking forward to another workshop in 2006, on a specific theme."

Cecile: "I need more time to realise what I'll take from here. I found it surprising to see that all learning teams are quite small, and that we did not talk about money. Apparently our activities don't cost a lot. I will be in touch with Anne about ethics, and with Jean about HR. Another event in 1 or 1,5 year would be great."

Jennifer: "It struck me that we have the same situations in different realities. We need to practice more at what we want to do with our members. Leadership and governance are crucial notions. It would be very useful to set up an email list or use the website www.impactliner.org. Another face-to-face event in 1,5 years would be a good idea."

Jean: "If wondered what I would tell my grandson, my son and my team about this event. To my grandson I would say that I was invited by friendly people in a beautiful space and that I ate on a boat. To my son I would say I had a Big Chat and high, intense discussions. To my team I would listen. A lot of things I learnt these days can be used to improve the strategic plan that we have to write for next year. I don't know if this exact group has to continue as a group, but the model should be repeated. We are a small country: we need air from outside. It would like to suggest that we exchange places with BOND or PSO for a week or two, to get an in-depth view of what we are doing."

Kaustov: "I heard old questions in a new background, which made me look differently at things. I would like to stay in touch to exchange information."

Eva: "I will focus more on the communication flow to the members to make sure that the ownership between the members will work."

Bram: "I found it interesting to see that we can have good discussions without really knowing what each organisation is about in actuality. We have a lot in common, but we take our own structure for granted as the most logical one. I learned from Eva that her members really want to do something. This group is just a coincidence, there were so many organisations missing that we should be in touch with."

Final evaluation

In conclusion, the group reflected on their initial hopes and fears. The fear of just scratching the surface did not become a reality, but different participants mentioned that this event did raise more and more questions instead of answers. The real effect is not yet possible to measure: "Now we have to go back to our own organisations and see how things work." Some people indicated that they would have liked to have more time to reflect on what had been said. Others disagreed and said that the structure of the event was so loose that everyone could choose their own moment for reflection. Another participant: "I really appreciated that I was not over-processed, but any space that was left, was filled with conversation." And she added a final word of appreciation to the organisation: "There is nothing worse than facilitating a bunch of facilitators."

Vera Spaans,
Journalist/textwriter For PSO/BOND

Annex 2: Program

Monday 10 October

09.30	**Opening**
10.00	**Meet and greet**
10.45	**Learning and capacity building**
11.30	**Getting to know our organisations:** Market Place (including lunch)
14.30	**Identifying subjects for Open Space**
17.15	**Feedback on the first day**
17.45	**Networking**
19.00	**Diner**

Tuesday 11 October

09.30	**Connecting with yesterday**
10.00	**Open Space**
12.15	**Lunch**
13.45	**Cartoons**
15.15	**Open Space**
15.45	**Road ahead…**
16.30	**Evaluation and Saying goodbye**
17.00	**End of Event**